

Good leaders do U-turns



TIM DICK

Only reactionaries refuse to reverse policy when logic dictates a change.

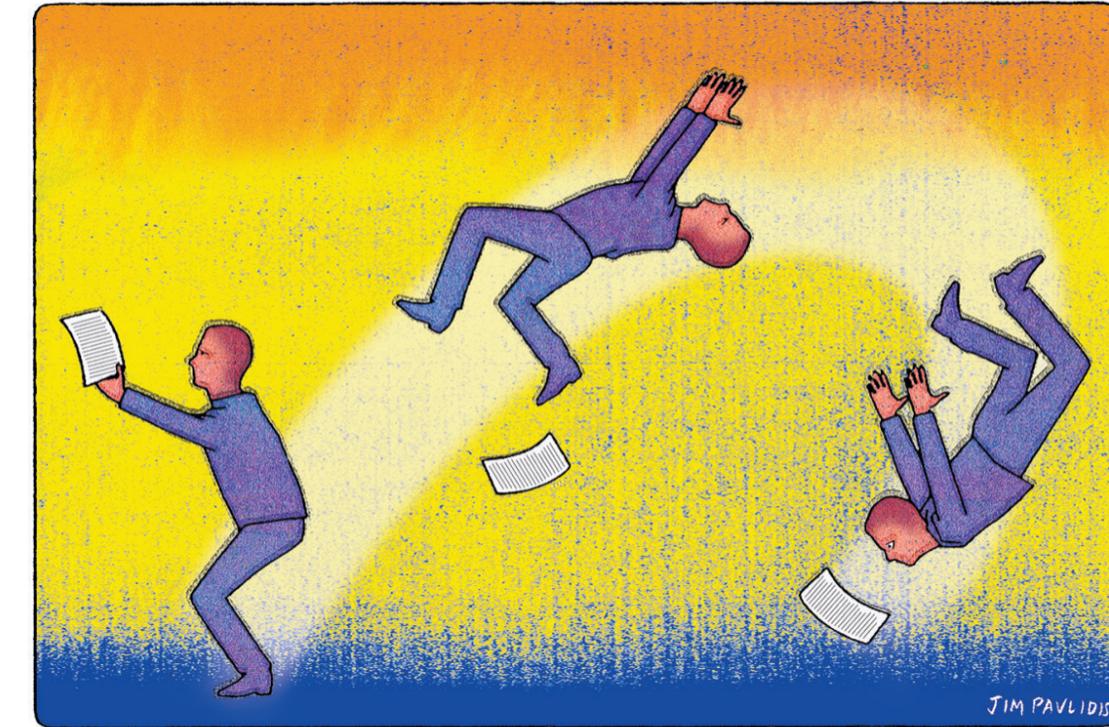
Praise be to backflips, honour to U-turns, let us applaud reversals in course.

Without them, we would have fewer climate scientists at the CSIRO when we need them more than ever. We would have a judge leading a royal commission without the support of the Indigenous communities most affected by Australia's mass incarceration.

We would have the nation's diplomats distracted from their real jobs trying to sell a dud candidate angling to lead the world when everyone knows he twice failed at leading Australia.

If it is true that Malcolm Turnbull encouraged Kevin Rudd's extended bout of megalomania, what sweet relief that he thought better of it. His change of mind spared the United Nations from the political wrecker-in-chief, one who'd denied running for months even though he was.

A U-turn, a backflip, a breach of good faith – whatever Rudd calls the mercy killing of his “candidature” – Turnbull's decision demonstrates that reason can still move the country from dealing with the



ravages of poor choices to reaping the benefits of good ones.

The Rudd rejection is the closest Turnbull will come to saving the world.

Rudd's remaining cheerleaders are still occupying column inches with their grief at what could (not) have been. They might be sad, Rudd might be mad, but Australia is spared the embarrassment of a national blunder gone global, thanks to a U-turn.

Contrast Rudd's self-entitled rage with the honourable stance shown in another backflip since the Turnbull government was returned. The decision of Brian Martin, former chief justice of the Northern Territory, to resign as royal commissioner into abuse in juvenile detention is a laudable U-turn.

He put principle before his own interests, the investigation before himself. Martin deserves praise for

changing his mind, deciding his best service was not to serve. By standing down he allowed the commission the crucial respect of Aboriginal people so grossly affected by the deepening incarceration crisis.

Praise too for the partial reversal of cuts to climate science at the CSIRO, a change met with churlishness by those with little interest in any science that doesn't fit their ideology.

Each of those backflips happened in spite of the tendency against them given the risk of scorn from changing course. Any politician who alters plans is swiftly attacked as having broken faith with the electorate, even if the original plan is bad or the facts require the change.

Keeping faith is too often judged politically better even if it does immense damage to the country, like the extravagant company tax cuts for minimal economic return, or the

marriage equality plebiscite.

That plan was forced on an unsuspecting country by the former prime minister who vies with Rudd for the place as Australia's worst. Given that the Parliament could allow marriage equality immediately and that the plebiscite will cost at least \$160 million and every elector's Saturday only to not bind politicians, it is a uniquely stupid idea.

Not pointless, given its odious objective is to delay the inevitable, ensuring some people will die waiting to wed.

It is the obvious candidate for the government's next U-turn, despite Turnbull's party room realpolitik in continuing with it.

Leaders should turn when it's obvious they're driving in the wrong direction. The fear of admitting you're wrong and “breaking” stupid promises merely means you can't explain why the evidence shows that

you should. Not turning when you ought to turn allows fear and feelings to triumph over fact. It lets reactionaries defeat reason.

Which brings us to the battiest of conspiracy theorists, One Nation senator-elect Malcolm Roberts, now to be paid \$199,040 each year to rail against the rules of grammar; the international-banking-socialist-world order conspiracy and climate science.

He's also worried that “18C” stops us talking about tax. I assume he means section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act, except that this law prohibits the public humiliation of people because of their race, not their tax deductions.

The threat to free speech is a much-abused topic, usually advanced by those who are the most free to speak the most loudly. Like Bill Leak, the News Corp cartoonist given acres of newsprint to justify his racist cartoon.

Free speech is a handy defence when justifying a very dumb cartoon, but not very convincing when the cartoon isn't funny.

Telling a newspaper it shouldn't have printed it is not the beginning of the end of liberalism. It's saying: you got it wrong.

But in post-fact politics, reason is no match for the reactionary thought bubbles which dominate the public debate. The quickest way to gain attention is to play the contrarian with a quick and incendiary comment, and gleefully count the clicks.

Despite that, I suspect most people are willing to listen to politicians who change their view. They don't get cranky with politicians for breaking promises if the promises were stupid in the first place. Most people know sometimes things have to change, and it's the poor leader who doesn't change for the fear of it.

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Our Olympic team is a terrible waste of \$300m

DAVID M. PRITCHARD

With the Rio Olympics under way, the question of how much countries should spend on the Games is again being asked. This is especially as wealthy, developed countries continue to spend staggering sums on their Olympic teams.

Britain spent \$374 million on its team for the London Olympics. It is spending even more for 2016 to ensure that it wins just as many gold medals. The British now spend four times more on Olympic competitors than on sport for schoolchildren.

Australia is another example of this massive state subsidisation of elite sportspeople. It may only have a third of Britain's population, but the Australian government roughly spent a mind-boggling \$300 million on its London team. The seven gold

medals it won in 2012 was its worst result since the 1988 Olympics.

Each gold medal cost Australian taxpayers \$42 million. In the hope of lifting its gold-medal count, Australia is spending even more for Rio. It does this in spite of deep government cuts to education and health.

State subsidisation of Olympic teams is hotly debated. In each country, the relevant national Olympic committee claims it's absolutely necessary to secure the “obvious” benefits of gold medals.

But others argue just as strongly that such benefits are illusory; for them this subsidisation is unethical in the age of budget austerity. It wastes scarce public income that would be better spent on doctors and physical education teachers.

What's needed is analysis of the benefits Olympic gold medals bring.

The ancient Greeks competed in Olympic Games for 1000 years. They had clear views about the benefits of victory. By studying their views, we

get insights into what gold medals might do for us.

The Greeks would have been horrified at our subsidisation of Olympic teams. They did not waste public income getting athletes to the Games.

Individuals were ready for the Olympics because their families had paid for the private classes of an athletics teacher. Olympians paid their own way to Olympia and their own expenses during the Games.

Yet the Greeks valued Olympic victory more highly than we do. Each polis (city-state) gave its Olympic victors free meals and free front-row tickets at sports events – for life.

These were the highest honours the Greeks could give. They were otherwise only given to victorious generals. That they were given to Olympians shows that the Greeks believed such victors significantly benefited their city-states.

What made an Olympic victory so politically valuable was publicity. The Olympics were the biggest

public event in ancient Greece; the Olympic stadium seated 45,000. The result was what took place became known to the entire Greek world, as ambassadors, athletes and spectators returned home and reported what they had seen.

Because so many Greeks attended the Games, it was possible for the whole Greek world to learn of the sporting victory a polis had gained through one of its competitors.

Such a victory gave city-states of otherwise no importance rare international prominence. To those that were regional powers, it gave uncontested proof of the standing they claimed in relation to their rivals.

The only other way a polis had to raise its international ranking was to defeat a rival in battle. But these outcomes were always uncertain and could cost thousands of lives.

Thus, a Greek city-state judged a citizen who had been victorious at the Olympics worthy of the highest public honours because he had

raised its standing without the need for his fellow citizens to die in battle.

We continue to view Olympians as our representatives and to be part of an international system of competing states. So an important lesson from the ancient Olympics is that international sporting success improves a state's standing.

The ancient Olympics provide some justification for state subsidisation of our Olympic teams. But we must not push these parallels too far.

For good or for ill, we are not ancient Greeks. International competition is no longer confined to sport and war. New bodies, such as the G20, OECD and the United Nations, also rank states in terms of education and health. In this new world order, we will only hold our ranking if we invest just as much in doctors and physical education teachers.

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